

Non-Custodial Parent Choices

Establishment and PEER Pilots:

Preliminary Impact Report

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KEY FINDINGS

Both the Non-Custodial Parent Choices Establishment Pilot (NCP Choices-EP) and PEER curriculum enhancement pilots represent efforts to extend and expand upon the original, highly successful NCP Choices program. In contrast to the original program, NCP Choices-EP assists low-income NCPs *earlier in their case histories*, before they have a chance to get behind on their child support payments and accumulate significant child support debt. The PEER pilot tests whether the addition of a curriculum including parenting and relationship skills and financial literacy to the workforce development services in the original program can measurably enhance the program's impacts on the ability of low-income NCPs to support their children. This report describes the early impacts of these pilots, both of which have shown some success in increasing child support collections.

The NCP Choices Establishment Pilot (EP) extends the successful NCP Choices program to NCPs earlier in their case histories, with the goal of this early intervention being to avoid the accumulation of child support debt. The pilot began in four offices in San Antonio in early 2010, and although there are differences in targeting and recruitment, NCPs who are enrolled receive the same workforce development services as those in the original NCP Choices program. Early findings suggest that the establishment pilot has clearly led to increased child support collections, including increased frequency, amount, and consistency of payments made by NCPs. However, due to low statistical power at this early phase in the study, no impacts of EP on other outcomes such as employment have yet been detected.

Similarly, the PEER pilot also extends the original version of NCP Choices program by expanding services to include parenting and relationship skills, as well as financial literacy, in a collaborative peer group setting. The PEER pilot began in late 2010 in Hidalgo County, El Paso, and Beaumont/Port Arthur. Although the PEER pilot impact study suffers from low statistical power due to small numbers of participants to date, it has still managed to demonstrate a positive impact on the consistency of child support payments.

The one major caveat to these results is that these are early findings from new programs, so it is too soon to say whether they will persist. Both pilots, however, show enough promise that they should continue to be studied, with researchers following participants over longer intervals of time to more accurately estimate impacts, and to see whether additional impacts will accrue.

INTRODUCTION

The Non-Custodial Parent Choices Establishment Pilot (NCP Choices-EP) and PEER pilot represent efforts to extend the highly successful NCP Choices program to a new population of non-custodial parents (NCPs), and to test whether a package of add-on services can enhance the already positive program impacts, respectively. Whereas the original NCP Choices program serves some of the most difficult child support cases – those involving unemployed and low-income NCPs who are already well behind on their child support obligations – NCP Choices-EP attempts to assist individuals earlier in their case histories, before they fall behind on their child support payments. On the other hand, the PEER pilot tests a version of NCP Choices that also includes use of a parenting and relationship skills, and financial education curriculum, in addition to the usual package of NCP Choices workforce development services. The question for the PEER pilot is whether this additional curriculum leads to greater impacts on important outcomes. This report examines the effectiveness of these two variants on a successful program.

The original Non-Custodial Parent Choices initiative (NCP Choices) began in 2005 as a partnership between the Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG) and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC). These two agencies joined forces to implement a model employment project for unemployed and underemployed non-custodial parents (NCPs) who had fallen behind on their child support payments, and whose children were current or recent recipients of public assistance. The project, currently ongoing at full scale in eighteen locations, establishes links among IV-D courts responsible for child support issues, OAG child support staff, and local workforce development boards to provide employment services and child support compliance monitoring to NCPs who need them. Because it serves NCPs in the *enforcement* phase of their child support cases, during which collections are monitored and enforced by the OAG, this original program will be referred to as the *enforcement* version of NCP Choices.

The NCP Choices enforcement program has been found to be highly successful in improving payment of child support, in terms of both increased frequency and consistency of payment, as well as increasing NCP rates of employment, reducing unemployment claims, and even reducing TANF receipt among the associated custodial parents (for latest program evaluation see Schroeder & Doughty, 2009). It is fair to ask, however, whether the program

is serving all the NCPs who could potentially benefit from the package of services offered. Under the original NCP Choices program design, only child support cases that are part of enforcement actions are eligible for the program. As a result, the typical NCPs ordered to participate in the program have by that time already built up significant levels of child support debt, also known as arrears.

Program administrators believe that the provision of employment services and enhanced payment monitoring to unemployed or underemployed NCPs much earlier in their case histories, as a part of their *establishment* proceeding, might help to prevent the accumulation of arrears. This is the basic idea behind the creation of the NCP Choices Establishment Pilot program.

Similarly, given the high level of success that the NCP Choices enforcement program has seen, it is natural to ask whether the package of workforce development services, intended primarily to help NCPs gain and keep a job, is optimal in terms of the level of assistance needed to yield the greatest impacts. One might ask, for example, whether additional services that are sometimes included in interventions such as this, including those that can build relationship, parenting, and financial skills, might also help to boost child support payment levels, and potentially other important outcomes measures as well. The PEER curriculum was designed as an add-on to the original NCP Choices program to provide this assistance.

In order to obtain an objective outside assessment of these two program enhancements, the OAG contracted with the Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources (RMC) at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin to study the implementation of NCP Choices and its program variations at various stages, and to conduct an analysis of the program impacts on key outcome measures. This report estimates preliminary program impacts on important outcomes for early participants in the NCP Choices Establishment Pilot and PEER curriculum enhancement pilot.

Following this introductory section, the report contains a background section including literature review and other context, followed sections briefly describing Choices services, and the program designs of the establishment pilot (EP) and PEER in comparison to the original NCP Choices program. After that is a section summarizing findings from the

preliminary implementation assessment of the EP program, as reported in late 2010 (Schroeder & Khan, 2010). An implementation study for PEER is ongoing as of this writing, and will be included in an updated version of this report in late summer, 2011, as will any updates to the implementation of the EP pilot including any program changes made since the last report. The impact analysis research designs for both programs is then described in a subsequent section, followed by a section with preliminary program impacts for these programs in their first year or less of implementation. Finally, a discussion section explores any conclusions that can be drawn thus far from the experience of these two program extensions.

BACKGROUND

The number of children living in single-parent households in the United States has increased dramatically since the 1960s. While an estimated 9 percent of children under 18 years of age lived with a single parent in 1960 (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002; Garfinkel, Miller, McLanahan & Hanson, 1998), by 2008 this rate had increased to nearly 26.3 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). As a result, about half of children living in the United States today will spend some part of their childhood in a single-parent household (Legler, 2003).

Coupled to this is an increase in the number of never-married mothers, who tend to have lower rates of support than previously married mothers (Grail, 2007; Roff, 2008). By 2006, nearly one third of custodial mothers had never been married (Grail, 2007). Single-mother families are about five times as likely to be poor as married-parent families (Cancian and Reed, 2009).

The Significance of Child Support

Policymakers view child support as a key strategy for reducing high poverty rates among single-parent families and reducing the public costs associated with supporting these families. Child support can be an important source of income for single-parent households, especially for poor families. Research indicates that twenty-two percent of poor women who received child support in 1995 were lifted above the poverty line by child support receipts (Miller et al., 2005). Among custodial parents below the poverty line who received full payments, the average amount of child support received (\$4,700) represented over 60% of annual income (Grail, 2007). Furthermore, families that can combine earnings and child support from NCPs are better able to make ends meet, sustain employment, and remain off of TANF cash assistance, as compared to single-parent families that do not receive support (Miller et al., 2005). Since so many single-head-of-household families continue to subsist on poverty-level wages (36.5 percent), increasing child support compliance will remain a key strategy for lifting these families out of poverty.

To the chagrin of many, the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA) substantially reduced federal financing of state child support enforcement. Although this incentive funding reduction was projected to reduce child support enforcement performance,

particularly in higher-performing states like Texas (Lewin Group, 2007), the expected reductions largely failed to materialize. Others noted that some provisions of the DRA made it easier for states to pass through child support collections to TANF recipients by (1) waiving the federal share of child support collected on behalf of current or former TANF recipients if states elect to pass through collections, and (2) denying the ability of States to require families to sign over their rights to past-due child support that accrued prior to their TANF application (Parrott, Schott, & Sweeney, 2007). Of course, greater pass-through policies directly place more of the funds collected into the hands of needy families. Moreover, there is research evidence suggesting that increasing pass-through while also disregarding some or all of this income for benefit determination purposes leads to both greater paternity establishment and greater child support collections (Cassetty, Meyer, & Cancian, 2002).

The child support program has made incredible strides in demonstrated effectiveness. In 2008, child support enforcement collected almost \$26.5 billion nationally, a 6.9% percent increase from 2007. Texas had the highest collections in the country in 2008, with \$2.56 billion in collections, an increase of 14.6% from 2007. Texas has led the nation in collections distributed since 2007 (DHHS, 2008).

Nationally in 2008, 13.1 percent of child support cases included families currently receiving public assistance and 45.1 percent included families who had previously received assistance (DHHS, 2008). In Texas, the child support caseload is slightly less dominated by TANF and former TANF recipients. Only 6.4 percent of Texas FY 2008 child support cases included families currently receiving public assistance and 38.2 percent included families who previously received assistance. Nationwide in 2008, child support enforcement (CSE) collected about \$978 million for families currently receiving public assistance and \$9.9 billion for families who had previously received assistance (DHHS, 2008). In Texas in 2008, the current/former TANF disparity was greater, with CSE collecting only \$14.4 million for families currently receiving assistance and \$821 million for families who had previously received assistance (DHHS, 2008).

Many NCPs want to be responsible parents but fall behind in making payments on time and end up accumulating significant arrears. If the amount of arrearage is large, it creates disincentives to continue contributing to child support or to finding employment in

the mainstream economy. By fiscal year 2009, the total child support caseload had increased to 15.8 million cases. (USHHS OCSE, 2010). In any given year, about 40% of all child support due goes unpaid. As a result, the nationwide arrears balance is in excess of \$107 billion (Ovwigbo, Saunders, & Born, 2009). At the same time, many states are hesitant to address the issue of child support arrears. Some see arrears as rightfully owed to the state or to the family of the children the noncustodial parent was ordered to support. These states do not want to be perceived as rewarding noncustodial parents for nonpayment, particularly when many other noncustodial parents are working hard and making sacrifices to remain current on their child support. In addition, states want to ensure that any policies to help noncustodial parents manage arrears benefit only those parents who have been unable rather than unwilling to pay child support.

CHOICES PROGRAM SERVICES OVERVIEW

NCPs in the original, enforcement version of the NCP Choices program as well as those in the EP and PEER pilots receive essentially the same Choices services as are available to clients in the regular, or TANF Choices program. This program is described briefly below, followed by a description of the program services as extended to NCPs.

TANF Choices Program

TANF Choices (formerly the JOBS program) is the employment and training program for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) families, operated under TWC's primarily work-first oriented service model which emphasizes personal responsibility, time-limited cash assistance, and the goal of work instead of welfare. The Choices program provides workforce development services to both single- and two-parent families. Although the program emphasizes work-first strategies such as job search, it has features of a mixed model, in that it provides training to some of those who are not work-ready.

Participation in Choices begins with a workforce orientation for applicants as their introduction to workforce center services. The initial activities provided to the Choices participants include both job readiness and job search. Those participants who do not find immediate employment are required to participate in community service. Participants who are actively pursuing employment are eligible for support services, including child care, transportation assistance, work-related expenses, and other support services to help in employment efforts. Some training opportunities may be made available as well. Those public assistance recipients who are required to participate but fail to do so without "good cause" suffer sanctions and discontinuation of benefits. Finally, Choices participants are granted post-employment services to assist in job retention and to document wage gains, career progression, and progression to self-sufficiency.

NCP Choices Workforce Service Design

The Choices program described above looks very similar when extended to Non-custodial Parents, regardless of whether they are in the establishment or enforcement phases of their cases. The NCP Choices program was developed to provide non-custodial parents

with similar services to enable them to work and pay their child support obligations. Workforce staff provides employment services to noncustodial parents to assist the unemployed or underemployed NCP in obtaining and retaining employment. Employment services include:

- Assessment,
- Registration in Work in Texas (WIT),
- Case management,
- Job referrals,
- Support services, and
- Retention services.

Workforce staff attends dockets to meet with NCPs, in order to establish a relationship with them and schedule an appointment to begin employment assessment. All unemployed NCP Choices participants should be available to participate in workforce services at a minimum of 30 hours per week (considered full time engagement). An assessment is completed for each NCP at the beginning of their participation with the NCP Choices program. An employment plan is also developed for each NCP based on the information gathered in the assessment.

Workforce staff maintains weekly contact with NCPs who are involved in job search activities. NCPs are provided with job referrals and are expected to report the results of their job search activities on a weekly basis to the workforce staff.

Workforce staff maintains communication regarding the NCPs compliance status and activities with OAG staff via the Choices On-Line Tracking System (COLTS). Workforce first documents compliance status at the 30th day after the order effective date.

NCP Choices participants are tracked for 6 months once successfully employed to determine whether the participant retains employment. Every NCP client has a workforce person assigned to him or her to assist in the job search. A resource room with five computers and other resources is also available on site to facilitate the NCP job search. The workforce personnel provide supportive services such as resume writing, interview and basic communication skills.

Another useful tool for assisting NCPs is that the workforce operators have partnered with local private businesses to provide subsidized employment (SE) to a small number of

NCPs who can benefit from it. In the typical arrangement, workforce subsidizes the employment by 90 percent for up to six months. The employer has to agree to retain the NCP as a full time employee afterwards, or else get him or her another job involving transferable skills. Although this arrangement may not be strictly enforceable, employers who do not follow through can be eliminated from consideration for future subsidized employment placements.

NCP CHOICES ESTABLISHMENT PILOT PROGRAM DESIGN

The idea behind the NCP Choices Establishment Pilot (NCP Choices EP) is to incorporate major elements of the existing NCP Choices program into the establishment proceedings to serve as a useful tool in early intervention and monitoring (EIM) efforts on the part of child support division (CSD) field staff. The establishment pilot version of NCP Choices is intended to reduce litigation time and increase the efficiency of the courts with fewer NCPs needing enforcement action. The pilot began in February 2010, and is being conducted in San Antonio (Bexar County) in four child support field offices: 202, 203, 205 and 211. As in the enforcement version, the NCP Choices EP program targets unemployed NCPs whose children currently or previously had received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits or Medicaid.

Program Overview

The NCP Choices Establishment Pilot is a straightforward extension of the NCP Choices enforcement program, except that workforce services are now offered to unemployed or underemployed NCPs when their child support case is being established, before significant arrears are allowed to accrue. This shift in when the program is delivered also means that the services cannot be required as part of a contempt action as is the case in the original model. Consequences for non-participation are linked to child support early intervention and monitoring – delaying the timeframes for sanctioning by a minimum of 60 days. The key question is whether the impacts of the enforcement version of the NCP Choices program can be maintained, despite the absence of swift and certain consequences for non-participation that proved to be important to the original program's success.

Key elements of the NCP Choices Establishment Pilot are the following:

- The OAG identifies NCPs on its caseload who are currently unemployed, who are associated with a family who either is or has been on TANF or Medicaid, and who also reside in the designated workforce service areas
- The IV-D Court includes the eligible NCPs on a regularly scheduled docket.
- NCPs agree to have participation in NCP Choices included in the child support order established by the court.
- The Contractor staff for the local workforce board attends the establishment

docket, enrolls NCPs at the IV-D court, and explains the contract outlining NCP rights and responsibilities and the consequences of non-participation. Workforce staff members are present in the courtroom to meet immediately with NCPs and can then set future appointments.

- Early Intervention and Monitoring (EIM) Child Support Officer (CSO), or the staff person each office has assigned, makes a 10 day reminder call to the NCP.
- Workforce staff checks the 30-day compliance button on the program's web-based database, the Choices On-Line Tracking System (or COLTS), to communicate to OAG whether the NCP has complied with the initial NCP-Choices order language
- COLTS allows both OAG and workforce staff to track the progress of identified NCPs and securely exchange relevant information
- The EIM Child Support Officer reviews COLTS for compliance with NCP Choices and payment status at 30 days. If the NCP is neither paying support nor complying with NCP Choices, the CSO documents noncompliance with the support order on COLTS, and immediately refers the case for a motion for contempt of court, even if only a single child support payment has been missed.

Eligibility and Targeting

Under the NCP Choices Establishment pilot model, NCPs who are in the establishment phase of their case histories are offered an opportunity to participate in NCP Choices as an early intervention and monitoring tool. The key elements to the success of NCP Choices enforcement program are that 1) The Workforce staff is present in the courtroom to meet immediately with NCPs, and 2) non-compliance with the support obligation brings about consequences. These two elements remain central to establishment pilot operations. This means that the existing structure for identifying eligible NCPs, as well as the eligibility criteria remain essentially the same for the NCPs in the establishment pilot program.

Non-custodial parents are eligible for NCP Choices if they:

- Have a IV-D case that is current or former TANF or Medicaid,
- Are unemployed or under-employed, with underemployed defined as an NCP who is
 - ❑ Working in an unstable job (e.g. seasonal, temporary jobs);
 - ❑ Capable of finding a higher wage job but is working at a low-wage job that requires less skill, training, or education than what the NCP has; or
 - ❑ Employed only part-time when the NCP could work full-time .

- Reside in the participating local workforce development board's service area and has a court order within the participating court's jurisdiction,
- Are not medically unable to work, as documented by the Social Security Administration,
- Are not currently incarcerated or otherwise unable to participate, and
- Have a Social Security Number.

To be eligible for the NCP Choices establishment pilot, cases must have agreed orders at court. At present, cases whose agreements are handled in the child support field office by the Child Support Review Process (known as CSRP cases), are not eligible. Furthermore, cases that merely involve motions to set support (MTSS) are excluded, nor are the following types of cases eligible for the establishment pilot:

- default orders
- foster care cases
- initiating interstate cases

Intake Procedure

After identification of eligible NCPs in the establishment phase of their cases, workforce representatives are available at court specifically to work with NCP Choices EP clients. The initial program description is given to the CP and NCP to explain the program, obtain agreement and provide direct hand-off to the Workforce Liaison present in the courtroom. It is emphasized to the NCP and the CP that this agreement will become part of the order of the court.

OAG staff has developed a legal order to be used specifically for the pilot that includes language about participation in the program. As is the case with enforcement NCP Choices procedures, workforce staff receives a copy of the order, so they know how to correctly create the case tracking record in the Choices On-Line Tracking System (COLTS).

Immediately the NCP meets with the Workforce liaison, who gives the NCP an information packet that explains the services offered by the program. An initial appointment is set to meet at the career center, preferably by the next day, and the NCP signs documents including a Workforce Participation Agreement (requiring 30 hours per week of job search and weekly check-ins) and an OAG Authorization to Release Information to the Local

Workforce Development Board.

One difference between the establishment pilot and the enforcement program is how workforce communicates with OAG staff about the NCP's participation in the program. Workforce staff uses the 30-day compliance button in COLTS to notify OAG about NCP compliance. This initial information will be used as part of the OAG's compliance determination at 30 days

Workforce Services

NCPs in both the enforcement and establishment Choices programs receive essentially the same Choices services as are available to clients in the TANF Choices program, as described previously.

Monitoring

The pilot program assists in early intervention and monitoring of the NCPs in the establishment phase to avoid large arrears accumulation. The following guidelines provide for effective monitoring of the NCPs in the establishment phase:

- The Early Intervention and Monitoring (EIM) Child Support Officer (CSO), or the staff person each office has assigned, makes a 10 day reminder call to the NCP.
- Workforce staff checks the 30-day compliance button on COLTS to communicate to OAG whether the NCP has complied with the initial NCP-C order language.
- The Early Intervention and Monitoring Child Support Officer reviews COLTs for compliance with NCP Choices and payment status at 30 days. If the NCP is neither paying child support nor complying with NCP Choices, the CSO documents noncompliance with the support order on COLTS, and immediately refers the case for a motion for contempt of court, even if only a single child support payment has been missed.

This process suggests that communication between the collaborating agencies is integral to the success of the pilot program.

NCP CHOICES PEER DESIGN

The PEER pilot represents an enhancement of the original, or enforcement version of the NCP Choices program. Like the original program, PEER focuses on engaging low-income, unemployed NCPs who are already behind on child support payments, and often owing large arrears balances. PEER also provides additional services, beyond workforce development, in a curriculum-based, collaborative peer group meeting setting. The PEER pilot began in late 2010 in three sites, including Hidalgo County, El Paso, and the Beaumont/Port Arthur region. The PEER pilot is still relatively new, and as such, this research team has not yet had the opportunity to examine in detail the implementation of PEER in the pilot sites. Instead, the program is described below as originally planned, and a future version of this report, due in late summer of 2011, will include an analysis of the early implementation.

Program Overview

Various educational curricula exist for young parents, but PEER is unique as it targets non-custodial parents who are already behind on child support, and are compelled to participate in NCP Choices as part of their court order. The basic idea behind the program is that by addressing the additional issues that these parents face, beyond concerns of finding and keeping employment, this will facilitate increased child support payment. The PEER curriculum has the following goals:

1. To benefit children by increasing their non-custodial parents' emotional & financial support;
2. To strengthen co-parenting relationships; and
3. To promote NCPs' parenting skills.

PEER Design

In addition to workforce development services, PEER was designed to provide non-custodial parents with information and tools to help them better understand and adapt to their

situations, as well as examples of successful NCPs. The PEER curriculum is designed to work with small groups of non-custodial parents. The group meetings involve weekly sessions that are two hours in duration. The sessions are aimed at developing behavioral objectives that emphasize the acquisition of specific knowledge and the attitudes and skills of participants.

The PEER curriculum recognizes that participants will have both strengths and challenges, and focuses on emphasizing each participant's individual strengths. The PEER facilitators are taught to recognize these strengths and believe that each parent who is involved in PEER will achieve success. The curriculum is designed to encourage active learning by participating in active interaction, working on case studies, and using role plays to help the group to build trust and increase the energy for group learning.

The curriculum is divided into two components, the first of which is a core curriculum covering four weekly sessions. This core curriculum focuses on reframing NCPs' child support obligations by putting emphasis on their children. The goals of the sessions in the core curriculum are primarily to shift the noncustodial parents' focus toward factors that are within their control and to recognize their obligations to provide support to their children.

Following the core curriculum, the noncustodial parents may then move to the advanced curriculum which also covers four weekly sessions of two hours each. The advanced curriculum focuses more on developing the parenting skills of the noncustodial parent. This part of the curriculum focuses on having the NCPs recognize that they have unique talents as a parent, and teaching them how to use their talents to communicate with their child and to make them a stronger child. After a parent completes the advanced curriculum, they may be considered for a PEER coach, a role that is described below. For the pilot study, sites implemented only the core curriculum.

PEER Roles

PEER is designed around three main roles in the curriculum: the participant, the facilitator, and the coach. The participants enrolled in the PEER curriculum are those NCPs who have been compelled to participate in PEER as a part of their court orders. The curriculum is designed to aid NCPs in developing their ability to redirect their anger, voice their concerns, and meet other parents who are in the same situation. The aim of the

curriculum is broad based in order to address people from various ethnic backgrounds and marital statuses.

The second role in the PEER curriculum is that of PEER facilitator. The PEER facilitator encourages the learning of the session objectives by using class activities, flipcharts, and other supplies, as well as the assistance of PEER coaches. The PEER facilitators work to reduce the participation challenges present in front of the participants and to work towards an effective, engaging PEER session.

The final important role in this curriculum is that of the PEER coach. The position of PEER coach is intended to be filled by an NCP Choices graduate who has maintained employment and continues to make child support payments. This role is created so that the PEER coaches could share their own stories of their struggles and become a role model and a source of inspiration for the participants. This role is more important in the core curriculum when the participants are struggling more in getting employment and paying child support.

SUMMARY OF EARLY IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS: ESTABLISHMENT PILOT

This section presents findings from an analysis of the planning and early implementation experiences with the NCP Choices establishment pilot (EP), as reported in Schroeder & Khan (2010). The analysis was based upon discussions with staff in the agencies collaborating on the project and on interviews conducted during site visits to San Antonio (Bexar County) in July 2010.

Most of the observations of the program process revolve around the idea that providing workforce development services to NCPs in earlier stages of their case histories is a fairly substantial *paradigm shift* for the NCP Choices program. It is important to recognize that the program does not merely serve the same NCPs earlier in their case histories. Instead, by intervening earlier in the ‘lifecycle’ of low-income NCPs’ cases, it is hoped that many of these NCPs will keep up with their child support obligations, and will not become the more difficult enforcement cases that comprise the bulk of the original NCP Choices caseload. Staff opinion confirms that establishment NCPs are on average more agreeable, and their cases are less contentious, at this early stage of their case histories.

Recommendations for improving the NCP Choices EP program were geared toward serving a broader, more representative cohort of low-income NCPs, and toward greater recruitment of eligible NCPs. The first recommendation was that NCP Choices EP services be extended to those who are in the Child Support Review Process (CSRP). NCP members of CSRP cases are widely believed to be the most agreeable, most likely to be compliant with child support orders, and have the least potential for conflict with the custodial parents. CSRP cases were originally excluded due primarily to logistical reasons, particularly the fact that their cases are handled in the child support office instead of the courtroom. It was suggested that changing the program to be more flexible in terms of where services are provided could open up the program to a broader base of NCPs who are more likely to benefit from workforce services.

The second major recommendation included suggestions for increasing the referral rate of NCPs into the EP program. Few of the local child support offices were meeting the target number of 10 NCPs served per office per month, and as a result there was potential for under-utilization of workforce services resources. In contrast to the enforcement program, it seems that the burden of referral of NCPs to EP falls more heavily on the managing attorneys

who already have substantial responsibilities. Thus, it was suggested that more emphasis be placed on training the OAG staff to increase awareness about the program, as well as increased emphasis on outreach, information, and education efforts within the courtroom to increase the program's visibility to families, managing attorneys, and judges alike. And for the longer term, it was suggested that the target group for EP might be expanded to other low-income families who may not have experience with the TANF or Medicaid programs, but may be at risk of needing welfare or Medicaid benefits in the near future. Taken together, these recommendations could bring enough clients into the NCP Choices establishment pilot program to make more efficient use of program resources, as well as make the workforce services available to a broader base of establishment cases whose members could potentially reap greater benefits.

IMPACT ANALYSIS RESEARCH DESIGN

The goal of providing Choices program services to unemployed and underemployed non-custodial parents (NCPs) is to assist them in becoming responsible parents who can meet their financial and other obligations to their children. The establishment pilot tries to achieve this by extending workforce development services to low-income non-custodial parents (NCPs) earlier in their histories, before they accumulate large child support arrears balances. Likewise, the PEER pilot tests whether the addition of certain supportive and educational services leads to greater program impacts, as compared to the original NCP Choices program services alone. The impact analysis was designed to determine the extent to which those ordered into either of these programs and their families benefit from the services received. The design of the impact analysis varies as appropriate to each of these initiatives.

The impact analysis is presented in three chapters. This Research Design chapter presents the research questions, the expected effects of the two programs, and a description of the comparison or control group design utilized to determine program impacts. The next chapter presents estimated program impacts, and a final chapter presents a discussion of the findings and their implications.

Research Questions

The impact evaluation addresses six research questions that aim to discover the effects of being ordered into EP, or of participating in the PEER curriculum, on unemployed and low-income non-custodial parents whose families are currently or formerly receiving TANF, by comparing treatment group clients' outcomes to those of a counterfactual comparison or control group. Utilizing a quasi-experimental design for EP, the comparison group consists of similarly situated NCPs in the same geographical areas who are not ordered into the NCP Choices EP program. And for PEER, utilizing a true experimental design complete with random assignment, the counterfactual, or what would have happened in the absence of the program, is estimated using a control group that was randomly assigned not to receive the services.

The original NCP Choices program model included mandatory, court-ordered participation in workforce development services with the threat of jail time for non-

participation for non-custodial parents of children who were or are receiving welfare benefits. As extensions or enhancements of this program, the EP and PEER research questions were designed to elucidate effects of the NCP Choices program on child support collections and other forms of support, workforce development participation, employment and earnings, unemployment claims, and TANF and other benefit receipt by associated custodial parents. Detailed research questions on these outcomes of interest are as follows:

1. Does the program lead to increased child support payments by non-custodial parents?
2. Does the program lead to more consistent payment of child support over time?
3. Does the program lead to increased workforce development participation by non-custodial parents? Or, does it lead to increased incarceration rates for non-payment of child support?
4. Does the program lead to increased employment rates and earnings levels by non-custodial parents?
5. Does the program lead to reduced unemployment claims by non-custodial parents?
6. Does the program for non-custodial parents lead to decreased TANF participation, or participation in other public assistance programs such as Food Stamps, for the associated custodial parents (CPs) and their children?

These questions and the expected effects of the two programs, if any, are summarized in **Error! Reference source not found.** Based on recent studies of Texas low-income NCP populations (Schroeder, Looney, and Schexnayder, 2004; Schroeder, King, and Hill, 2005), including evaluations focusing on the enforcement version of NCP Choices (Schroeder & Doughty, 2009), the EP program is expected to lead to increased and more consistent child support collections, increased employment, reduced unemployment claims, and reduced reliance on TANF or other benefits by the associated custodial parents. For PEER, the major predictions include increased and more consistent payment of child support, and perhaps a concomitant reduction in receipt of TANF or other benefits. For PEER, since both the treatment and control groups receive regular NCP Choices services, it is not expected that the program will lead to increased employment or related measures.

Table 1: Research Questions and Expected NCP Choices Effects

Research Question	Expected NCP Choices EP Effect	Expected NCP Choices PEER Effect
Q1. Payment of child support.	+	+
Q2. Consistent payment of child support.	+	+
Q3. Workforce development participation by NCP.	+	. ¹
Q4. Employment and earnings of NCP.	+	?
Q5. Unemployment claims by NCP.	-	?
Q6. Use of TANF or other benefits by CP.	-	-

Random Assignment vs. Quasi-Experimental Comparison Group Design

Ideally, from the perspective of valid estimation of program impacts, the NCP Choices demonstrations described here would be conducted as true experiments by randomly assigning potential participants to experimental and control groups. This randomization ensures that, on average, no differences exist between the two groups at the point of random assignment, and thus any differences that emerge later can be confidently attributed as program impacts. Random assignment was utilized for PEER, as described below.

However, because a random assignment design was not feasible for the EP demonstration, an alternative approach to comparison group selection was utilized. Over the years, researchers have developed a number of ‘quasi-experimental’ approaches for creating counter-factual comparison groups when random assignment is not possible for whatever reason (NRC, 2001). Although the methods are not perfect, they represent the best approach available, short of random assignment, for selecting near-equivalent comparison groups.

One approach to creating a ‘quasi-experimental’ comparison group that is as similar as possible to the establishment pilot treatment group in all measurable respects involves

¹ Random assignment to the PEER groups occurs at the point of workforce participation, so all participants in PEER participate in workforce services.

selection of multivariate ‘nearest neighbors.’ This involves systematically comparing each treatment group member to all potential comparison group members on a number of characteristics using a formula to compute multivariate distance. The dimensions on which they are compared typically consist of demographic, economic, program participation and other characteristics. The potential comparator with the closest matching characteristics, known as the ‘nearest neighbor,’ is then selected to be in the comparison group. This process is continued until all members of the experimental group have had their own nearest neighbors chosen. Outcomes are then compared for the two groups in order to compute net impacts (e.g., Heckman, 1992; Heckman & Hotz, 1984). A detailed discussion of comparison group selection is provided below.

Establishment Pilot Comparison Group Selection Procedure

The following procedures and variables were used in the selection of nearest neighbors to comprise the quasi-experimental comparison group for the EP pilot. The selection of nearest neighbors began with the identification of an appropriate pool of clients from which to choose the comparison group. Because it was desirable to have members of the comparison group be as similar as possible to those ordered into the program, the database of NCPs with active child support cases in the same county (Bexar) was utilized as a starting point. From this, the matching procedure considered detailed geographic, demographic and historical information on their child support collections, earnings, and other relevant information to select similarly situated NCPs, as described below.

Matching Procedure

Nearest-neighbor matching is an iterative computational process done for one NCP Choices EP participant (or target) at a time, as follows. First, the initial pool of potential neighbors for the target participant was restricted to those with an exact match on important categorical dimensions, including county of residence, gender, time, and others, for which ‘distance’ is difficult or impossible to quantify. Next, the target participant was compared against every remaining potential neighbor on all important near-continuous dimensions that could be measured through our administrative data sources. To objectively measure the degree of similarity between a target and potential comparator, standardized absolute

distances between each pair on relevant dimensions were summed to arrive at a measure of total multivariate distance (Mahalanobis, 1936). When all potential neighbors had been compared to the target, the one with the shortest distance, or the person most similar to the target in multivariate space, was selected as the nearest neighbor. This neighbor was retained for the comparison group, then removed from further matching consideration², and the process was repeated for the remaining NCP Choices EP participants until the selection of the comparison group was complete.

In some circumstances, particularly when the quality of matches produced in this manner suffers, it may be necessary to utilize a technique called ‘caliper matching,’ in which both members of the most poorly matched pairs are removed from further analysis.

Basic dimensions for matching

The basic dimensions for selecting a comparison group of non-custodial parents not ordered into the NCP Choices program would typically consist of variables from the following categories:

- Demographics at program entry, including age, gender and race/ethnicity;
- Employment and earnings histories, as measured from the UI earnings database;
- Child support case features, including number and ages of children, collections history (including the current arrears balance), and number of other cases with which the NCP is associated;
- Features of the custodial parent (CP) on the case to which the NCP is linked, including demographics, employment, earnings, and assistance histories, and number of other child support cases on which the CP is listed;
- Geography, as measured by county of residence (only those residing in the same counties are selected);
- History of NCP participation in workforce development services; and
- Date of entry into the NCP Choices program was controlled for implicitly by selecting comparison group members based on their characteristics as of each NCP Choices group member’s program entry date.

Not all of the dimensions identified above were included in the match procedure.

² This is known as sampling without replacement, and it prevents the same comparator being selected for the comparison group multiple times. While it is possible to sample with replacement and get slightly better matches, this requires a complex adjustment to the standard errors, and can lead to the undesirable situation of having one person serve as comparator for a large number of treatment group members.

However, the subset of measures used (see

Table 2 and

Table 3) includes all the most important ones to ensure adequately matched comparison group members.

Comparison Group Selection

Comparison group selection for NCP Choices EP was done based on a preliminary analysis of child support and other administrative data sources, the results of which are documented below.

Table 2 compares relevant characteristics of those ordered into NCP Choices EP against the entire pool of similar NCPs with active child support cases in the same county as those served by NCP Choices EP (Bexar County, San Antonio). This comparison illustrates the ways in which NCPs ordered into the NCP Choices EP differed systematically from those NCPs not ordered into the program. Later, after the comparison group selection is completed,

Table 3 compares those ordered into NCP Choices EP against members of the comparison group, who were selected from among the broader pool of NCPs to be as similar as possible to NCP Choices EP clients on these measured dimensions. A brief discussion follows.

Table 2 shows a comparison of pre-program characteristics of those ordered into NCP Choices EP³ against the entire pool of NCPs from which a comparison group was to be chosen. The comparison group pool consists of all other NCPs who have active child support cases in Bexar County, but who have not been served by the original NCP Choices program. Results of this comparison indicate that NCP Choices EP clients differed substantially from other NCPs in Bexar County. NCP Choices EP clients tend to be substantially younger, are more likely to be Hispanic, and have much younger dependents than other NCPs. NCP Choices EP clients tended to have worse employment histories in many respects, but due to the small sample size, the differences were statistically significant for only a few measures. NCP Choices EP clients had shorter earnings histories, earned over \$2300 per quarter less than other NCPs, and of those experiencing recent earnings dips of 20% or greater, the dips were more recent, and represented a greater percentage of income lost among NCP Choices EP clients. In terms of their interactions with the formal child support system, and consistent with the intentional targeting of NCPs earlier in the process, NCP Choices EP clients tended to have child support cases open for far less time, averaging approximately two years since their cases opened, as opposed to over eight years for other NCPs⁴. Also consistent with this, they have been paying child support for a far shorter time, and paid 40 percent less frequently in the prior year, as compared to other NCPs in the county. NCP Choices EP clients tend to owe far less in ongoing child support obligations, both current and for arrears, but their arrears balances, averaging around \$11,000, were not significantly different from those of other NCPs. Also consistent with the design intent of NCP Choices EP to serve clients earlier in the process, these arrears balances are roughly a third of those seen for clients of the original NCP Choices program. The custodial parents (CPs) associated with NCP Choices EP clients were more likely to have been receiving Food Stamps (now Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, or SNAP) benefits in the prior two years. Those ordered into NCP Choices EP had been far less likely to be responsible for carrying health insurance for the children associated with their cases, according to their child support orders. Finally, both groups of NCPs were unlikely to have recently participated in

³ Although intake continues, this comparison includes only those ordered into NCP Choices EP between February and September of 2010.

⁴ Note that these measures sum across all NCPs' open cases, not just the one case for which they may have been referred to NCP Choices EP, which may be opening around the time of the referral.

workforce development programs available to them at the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC).

Table 2: Comparison of NCP Choices EP Clients with Other NCPs in Same County

	NCP Choices EP	All Other NCPs in Target County	
All NCPs	N=106	N=95,239	
NCP age (years)	27.0	38.0	**
NCP male	88.7%	96.6%	
NCP Hispanic	72.6%	61.5%	*
NCP black	15.1%	14.8%	
NCP number of active CS cases	1.3	1.2	
NCP number of dependents	3.3	3.3	
Age of youngest dependent, years	2.4	8.7	**
Age of oldest dependent, years	4.9	11.3	**
Time since first observed NCP earnings (quarters)	27.5	32.0	**
NCP employed at program entry	44.3%	47.1%	
Percent of time NCP employed over 4 years prior to program	51.9%	52.0%	
NCP average quarterly earnings over 4 years prior to program	\$2,316	\$4,724	**
NCP experienced earnings dip of at least 20% within prior 2 years	54.7%	32.2%	
Any Unemployment Insurance claims filed in year prior to program	13.2%	7.6%	
Any Unemployment Insurance benefits received in year prior to program	8.5%	5.7%	
Time since first CS case opened (days)	682	3094	**
Time since CS first collected on this case (months)	13.5	58.2	**
Time since CS last collected on this case (months)	3.8	6.7	*
Percent of time CS collection was made in prior year	10.6%	50.9%	**
Any CS collection made via federal offset in prior year	2.8%	5.7%	
Percent of time TANF received by associated CP(s) in prior 2 years	2.4%	1.5%	
Percent of time Food Stamps (SNAP) received by associated CP(s) in prior 2 years	62.2%	40.2%	**
Percent of time NCP responsible for carrying health insurance, prior year	7.5%	45.4%	**
Percent of time NCP responsible for medical support payments, prior year	1.9%	4.2%	
Any low-intensity workforce development participation in year prior to program	2.8%	2.6%	
Any high-intensity workforce development participation in year prior to program	.0%	.3%	**
Capias issued for arrest of NCP in 6 months prior to program	.9%	2.5%	
Approximate arrears balance at program entry	\$11,179	\$17,538	
Total current support obligation (PP1) at program entry	\$162	\$436	**
Total arrears obligation (PP2) at program entry	\$48	\$106	**
Those experiencing an earnings dip	N=58	N=28,748	
Time since earnings dip occurred (quarters)	4.84	5.14	**
Percent of earnings which earnings dip represents	85.1%	75.7%	**

The selection of a comparison group was done using the weighted multivariate nearest-neighbor matching procedure, but the result of this process was unsatisfactory. It was determined that for a small percentage of EP clients, the nearest-neighbor selected was not as similar as is required to form a valid comparison group. Accordingly, utilizing the caliper method described earlier, the thirteen EP clients with the worst matches, along with their selected matches, were dropped from further analysis.

Table 3 presents a comparison of the 93 remaining NCP Choices EP clients against the quasi-experimental comparison group that was selected from the much larger pool of NCPs in Bexar County. Comparison of the second and third columns of

Table 3 indicates that, subsequent to the comparison group selection and application of a caliper, the aggregate-level characteristics of these two groups were quite similar at the point of entry into the program. T-tests comparing the two groups on all listed characteristics, as illustrated in the final column, confirmed that there were no statistically significant differences between them on thirty-one observed dimensions.

In total, the selection procedure combined with the caliper screen successfully created a comparison group with observable characteristics at the point of entry into the program that were quite similar to those of NCP Choices EP clients. It is interesting to note some changes in the group that occurred due to the application of the caliper. In particular, the arrears balances are far lower than they were before 13 treatment group members and their counterparts were dropped. This suggests that those NCP Choices EP clients who had high arrears balances were particularly difficult to find matches for. As a consequence of dropping these clients from the impact analysis, the results are less likely to generalize to clients with large arrears balances.

On the whole, results of the matching procedure suggest that the quasi-experimental design implemented above is likely to have good internal validity for estimating the impacts of the NCP Choices EP program. Note, however, that this does not mean that the groups are necessarily as similar as possible on dimensions that were not measurable through the available administrative data sources.

Table 3: Comparison of NCP Choices EP Clients with Selected Comparison Group

	NCP Choices EP	Comparison Group
All NCPs	N=93	N=93
NCP age (years)	25.9	24.9
NCP male	88.2%	88.2%
NCP Hispanic	75.3%	74.2%
NCP black	15.1%	11.8%
NCP number of active CS cases	1.12	1.12
NCP number of dependents	2.19	2.01
Age of youngest dependent, years	2.27	2.30
Age of oldest dependent, years	3.92	3.88
Time since first observed NCP earnings (quarters)	26.7	24.2
NCP employed at program entry	43.0%	41.9%
Percent of time NCP employed over 4 years prior to program	50.8%	50.0%
NCP average quarterly earnings over 4 years prior to program	\$2,184	\$2,157
NCP experienced earnings dip of at least 20% within prior 2 years	53.8%	53.8%
Time since first CS case ⁵ opened (days)	514	485
Any Unemployment Insurance claims filed in year prior to program	9.7%	9.7%
Any Unemployment Insurance benefits received in year prior to program	4.3%	5.4%
Time since CS first collected on this case (months)	7.7	6.5
Time since CS last collected on this case (months)	2.7	1.3
Percent of time CS collection was made in prior year	7.7%	7.3%
Any CS collection made via federal offset in prior year	1.1%	1.1%
Percent of time TANF received by associated CP(s) in prior 2 years	2.0%	1.6%
Percent of time Food Stamps (SNAP) received by associated CP(s) in prior 2 years	60.8%	59.3%
Percent of time NCP responsible for carrying health insurance, prior year	2.2%	.0%
Percent of time NCP responsible for medical support payments, prior year	1.1%	1.1%
Any low-intensity workforce development participation in year prior to program	3.2%	3.2%
Any high-intensity workforce development participation in year prior to program	.0%	.0%
Capias issued for arrest of NCP in 6 months prior to program	.0%	.0%
Approximate arrears balance at program entry	\$1,727	\$1,360
Total current support obligation (PP1) at program entry	\$74	\$80
Total arrears obligation (PP2) at program entry	\$5	\$10
Those experiencing an earnings dip	N=50	N=50
Time since earnings dip occurred (quarters)	4.8	4.9
Percent of earnings which earnings dip represents	84.3%	85.5%

⁵ This does not necessarily represent the case for which the order into EP was made.

Random Assignment: NCP Choices PEER

For the NCP Choices PEER pilot, it was not necessary to select a comparison group, since NCPs ordered into this pilot study were randomly assigned to receive either the regular NCP Choices support services plus enhanced services (treatment group), or just the regular services (control group). Random assignment was done in groups or clusters, with the date of being ordered into Choices determining whether one gets assigned to the experimental or control group. A spreadsheet containing group assignments for all dates on which orders to the program could occur was consulted to determine a given client's assignment. All clients assigned on the same day were ordered into the same group. This was done so that no contamination of procedures could occur due to one client hearing about another's assignment.

This section documents the characteristics of the treatment and control groups. By comparing the characteristics of members of these two groups as of the dates of their assignment, it is possible to confirm whether the random assignment procedure seemed have functioned properly.

Table 4 lists the characteristics of members of these two groups at the point of random assignment, as measured utilizing the same dimensions shown above. Note that this comparison includes all clients assigned from the beginning of the program through January, 2011, while the program impacts reported later include only those assigned through September, 2010. T-tests indicated no significant differences between these two groups on any of the listed dimensions. Thus, the random assignment procedure appears to have been functioning in an unbiased manner, yielding comparable treatment and control groups that should have high internal validity for assessing the impacts of the PEER pilot program.

Table 4: Comparison of NCP Choices PEER Treatment and Control Groups

	PEER Treatment Group	PEER Control Group
All NCPs	N=189	N=193
NCP age (years)	33.3	34.0
NCP male	93.7%	97.4%
NCP Hispanic	67.2%	62.2%
NCP black	23.3%	26.9%
NCP number of active CS cases	1.6	1.6
NCP number of dependents	7.8	6.9
Age of youngest dependent, years	7.1	6.5
Age of oldest dependent, years	10.8	11.1
Time since first observed NCP earnings (quarters)	33.8	33.8
NCP employed at program entry	22.2%	26.9%
Percent of time NCP employed over 4 years prior to program	38.7%	40.5%
NCP average quarterly earnings over 4 years prior to program	\$2,377	\$2,430
NCP experienced earnings dip of at least 20% within prior 2 years	53.4%	51.8%
Any Unemployment Insurance claims filed in year prior to program	11.1%	13.0%
Any Unemployment Insurance benefits received in year prior to program	4.2%	8.8%
Time since first CS case opened (days)	2870	2829
Time since CS first collected on this case (months)	59.5	54.7
Time since CS last collected on this case (months)	11.5	10.5
Percent of time CS collection was made in prior year	20.8%	20.9%
Any CS collection made via federal offset in prior year	13.8%	16.1%
Percent of time TANF received by associated CP(s) in prior 2 years	4.3%	3.8%
Percent of time Food Stamps (SNAP) received by associated CP(s) in prior 2 years	72.9%	76.4%
Percent of time NCP responsible for carrying health insurance, prior year	32.4%	31.3%
Percent of time NCP responsible for medical support payments, prior year	3.7%	7.3%
Any low-intensity workforce development participation in year prior to program	6.3%	6.7%
Any high-intensity workforce development participation in year prior to program	1.1%	.5%
Capias issued for arrest of NCP in 6 months prior to program	12.2%	13.0%
Approximate arrears balance at program entry	\$43,613	\$52,298
Total current support obligation (PP1) at program entry	\$723	\$740
Total arrears obligation (PP2) at program entry	\$147	\$215
Those experiencing an earnings dip	N=101	N=100
Time since earnings dip occurred (quarters)	5.58	5.22
Percent of earnings which earnings dip represents	86.4%	85.8%

PROGRAM IMPACTS

As discussed above for the NCP Choices EP program, the quasi-experimental comparison group selection procedure, modified to select the best matches using a caliper, produced a comparison group of matched NCPs who were quite similar in all measured ways to the participants before their entry into the program. Similarly, the effectiveness of the random assignment mechanism was confirmed for the PEER pilot, with no differences observed between the control and experimental groups. The impact estimates reported below for both of these programs were further adjusted for the minor differences that remained between the groups. In the case of the establishment pilot, we can be confident that the impacts reported in this section were mostly if not all due to NCP Choices participation. And for the PEER pilot, because of the successful random assignment of persons to treatments, we can be certain that the enhanced PEER services caused any differences observed later between the two groups.

Establishment Pilot Impacts

Impacts of the NCP Choices establishment pilot are discussed in this section, while impacts of the PEER curriculum are discussed in the next section. Impacts presented here are computed for participants entering the program between February and September, 2010. Post-program outcomes are estimated through the third quarter of 2010 for many measures, and through the fourth quarter of 2010 for child support collections and unemployment claims.

Workforce Development Participation by Non-custodial Parents

The first goal of the NCP Choices EP program was to get eligible NCPs into workforce development services that they may need in order to improve their employment prospects. Thus, the first set of outcome analyses was designed to examine two research questions related to the extent to which those ordered into NCP Choices EP were engaged in the program and services were received:

- Does NCP Choices EP lead to increased workforce development participation by non-custodial parents?
- Does NCP Choices EP lead to increased incarceration rates of NCPs?

The first question was included as a check on the extent to which NCP Choices EP clients actually followed through with workforce development services. The second question was designed as an attempt to measure the flip side of this outcome: the extent to which NCPs were subjected to greater rates of incarceration for either a failure to cooperate with Choices requirements, or for non-payment of child support.

It is important to recognize, as discussed elsewhere in this report, that this impact evaluation does not measure the impact of workforce development participation per se. Instead, the impact of NCP Choices EP captures the effect of *being ordered into* the program, together with the corresponding threat of jail time for noncompliance. Thus, it was expected that not all NCPs ordered into the program would participate in NCP Choices EP, and in fact, some portion would likely end up being ordered to serve time in jail.

Unfortunately, unanticipated problems with the workforce participation administrative data prevented the timely computation of workforce development participation impacts for those ordered into EP. This will be corrected for the final report, due in late Summer 2011. In the meantime, however, evidence from TWC reporting⁶ suggests that the Choices participation rate of those ordered into EP may be substantially lower, at around 28%, as compared to almost 90% participation in the original NCP Choices program (Schroeder & Doughty, 2009). The participation rate of members of the comparison group is unknown at this point, but are expected to be at or near zero. If this low participation rate of EP participants holds in the upcoming analysis of administrative records data, it would suggest that impacts of being ordered into EP are not solely due to the workforce services themselves, but at least partly due to other features of the order to participate.

⁶ William Minor, personal communication, May 12, 2011.

Table 5: NCP Choices EP Impact on NCPs' Workforce Development Participation

	NCP Choices EP Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices EP Impact
Percent of time NCP participating in Choices program	#	#	#
Percent of time NCP participating in any workforce development program(s)	#	#	#
Percent of time NCP participating in any high-intensity workforce development program(s)	#	#	#
Percent of months in which NCP ordered to jail for non-payment of child support	1.1%	1.2%	-.1%

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

The final measure shown in

Table 5 revealed very low rates of NCPs being ordered to jail for non-payment of child support or non-participation in Choices. These rates were equally low for NCP Choices EP clients and members of the comparison group, as there were no significant differences between the groups on this measure.

Payment of Child Support

The next set of analyses addresses the question whether the NCP Choices EP program leads to increased child support payments. One measure gauges the frequency of any child support collections and another examines the average dollar amount of collections⁷. These measures are computed on a monthly basis. Since the post-program follow-up period is still relatively short, at less than a year for all clients, these should be regarded as short-term impacts. Related measures in the next section quantify the *consistency* with which such payments were made over time.

As shown in Table 6, NCP Choices EP participation was associated with an 18 percentage-point increase in the frequency of any child support collections subsequent to being ordered into the program. Though the absolute frequency of collections is not very high, occurring in less than half of the months following program entry, it is a substantial improvement relative to their recent payment histories. Furthermore, the increased frequency of collections for NCP Choices EP participants represents an impressive 82 percent gain in collections rate relative to the comparison group.

Beyond the increased frequency of collections, the NCP Choices EP program was also associated with a large increase in the average monthly dollar amount of child support collections. Overall, NCP Choices EP participants paid approximately \$36 per month more in child support than their counterparts in the comparison group, a 42 percent increase in total collections⁸.

⁷ Note that because of data limitations, child support payments that were collected via federal offset (income-tax refunds, for example) were not included in these collections figures. Because they were equally excluded for NCP Choices EP and comparison group members, this should not substantially bias the net impacts reported.

⁸ Although a statistical test on the average collections across all months, including months with zero collections, can be misleading due to the non-normal nature of the underlying distributions, research suggests that this concern is unwarranted with sufficiently large sample sizes, as in the present study.

Table 6: NCP Choices EP Impact on Child Support Collections

	NCP Choices EP Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices EP Impact
Percent of time any child support collections made	39.2%	21.5%	17.7% **
Monthly average child support collections	\$122	\$86	\$36 **

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

Consistent Payment of Child Support

Making larger child support payments more often is certainly important, but for families to rely on this as a source of steady income, they need the payments to be made consistently over time. To gauge the *consistency* of child support collections, two measures were constructed that tabulated, for every three month period subsequent to program entry, the proportion of time any collections were made in at least two out of three months, and in all three out of three months⁹. Results of these child support consistency comparisons, shown in Table 7, indicate that the NCP Choices EP impact on consistency of child support payment was positive and statistically significant for both measures. NCP Choices EP participants were 20 percentage points more likely to pay child support in at least two out of every three months, and 6 percentage points more likely to pay in three out of three months, relative to their comparison group counterparts. This impact represents a 97 and a 38 percent increase, respectively, in the frequency of consistent payment of child support.

Table 7: NCP Choices EP Impact on Consistency of Child Support Collections

	NCP Choices EP Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices EP Impact
Consistent payment of child support, at least 2 out of 3 months	39.8%	20.2%	19.6% **
Consistent payment of child support, 3 out of 3 months	22.7%	16.4%	6.3% *

⁹ Child support payment consistency measures were introduced in Schroeder, Looney, & Schexnayder, 2004.

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

Employment and Earnings of Non-custodial Parents

The next set of analyses attempts to determine whether NCP Choices EP leads to increased employment rates and earnings levels of non-custodial parents. Three measures address this topic, including one that gauges the percent of time NCPs were employed subsequent to program entry, another that measures the quarterly earnings levels of those who were employed in any given calendar quarter, and an unconditional earnings measure that is calculated including both the employed and unemployed.

Table 8: NCP Choices EP Impact on Employment and Earnings

	NCP Choices EP Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices EP Impact
Percent of time NCP employed	51.6%	48.4%	3.2%
Average quarterly earnings, among employed NCPs	\$3021	\$3231	-\$210
Unconditional earnings, including those employed and unemployed	\$1472	\$1676	-\$204

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

As shown in Table 8, the NCP Choices EP program to this point has had no significant impacts on measures of NCP employment rates or earnings levels. It should be noted, however, that due to the lag in reporting of Unemployment Insurance earnings, these outcomes currently address three fewer months of follow-up than do the monthly child support measures cited above. Therefore, these earnings outcomes represent only the fraction of clients entering the program by June of 2010, and consisting of only a one- or two-quarter post-program follow-up for this subset of clients. Because of this, it is too early to say with much certainty whether the NCP Choices EP program will have employment or earnings impacts.

Unemployment Insurance Claims by Non-custodial Parents

The next set of questions to be addressed includes whether NCP Choices EP leads to

reduced rates of filing unemployment claims or receiving unemployment benefits, and whether the program leads to more stable earnings trends, making NCPs more likely to be eligible for the unemployment insurance (UI) program if they were to lose their jobs. The first question was answered by gauging the percent of months in which NCPs filed unemployment claims subsequent to program entry, and the percent of months in which NCPs received unemployment benefits. It was also addressed by calculating the impact on the dollar amount of unemployment benefits received.

As shown in the first three rows of

Table 9, to date there have been no significant impacts of the NCP Choices EP program on filing of unemployment claims or receipt of unemployment benefits. This should not be surprising, as this is the kind of measure that is likely to show effects of an employment program only after several quarters have elapsed since the services were provided, thus allowing the services to affect the employment histories on which unemployment benefits are largely based.

Table 9: NCP Choices EP Impact on Unemployment Insurance Measures

	NCP Choices EP Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices EP Impact
Percent of months in which NCPs filed unemployment claims	.0%	1.5%	-1.5%
Percent of months in which NCP received unemployment benefits	.0%	1.5%	-1.5%
Average monthly unemployment benefits received by NCP	\$1.2	\$94.33	-\$93.13
Percent of time monetarily eligible for UI based on earnings	42.5%	38.4%	4.1%

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

The second question regarding unemployment was answered based on NCP earnings histories subsequent to the program, by calculating the percent of time in which NCP earnings were sufficient to qualify him/her monetarily for the UI program (if he or she were to lose his/her job). Unemployment Insurance eligibility after a job loss depends in part on earnings levels over the previous five quarters, but actual receipt of unemployment benefits depends on other factors as well as monetary eligibility, such as the reason for leaving the job. Getting fired for cause would typically disqualify one for this benefit. Thus, any program impacts that lead to stabilized earnings trends for NCPs could have the added benefit of making them eligible for this important safety net.

Thus far, as shown in the last row of

Table 9, NCP Choices EP has had no significant impact on monetarily eligibility for unemployment benefits. As this measure is based on UI employment records, it suffers from the same reduced follow-up interval discussed above in regards to employment and earnings. Therefore, it is likely too soon to expect significant impacts on this measure.

Receipt of TANF and other Public Assistance by Custodial Parents

The final set of analyses addresses the question whether NCP Choices EP for non-custodial parents has led to decreased TANF participation for the associated custodial parents (CPs) and their children. A similar question asks whether NCP Choices EP was associated with reduced participation in SNAP (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program), formerly known as the Food Stamps program. Both measures count the percent of post-program months in which the custodial parent(s) received TANF or SNAP benefits, with receipt of benefits for any part of the month considered as receipt for the entire month. Related measures also look at the average dollar amounts of benefits received under such programs, on a monthly basis.

Table 10 illustrates findings that thus far, NCP Choices EP has had no significant impact on receipt of TANF or SNAP benefits by custodial parents associated with those NCPs ordered into the program.

Table 10: NCP Choices EP Impact on Receipt of TANF and SNAP by Custodial Parent

	NCP Choices EP Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices EP Impact
Percent of time CP(s) receiving TANF benefits	1.1%	1.8%	-.7%
Average monthly TANF benefits, CP(s)	\$5	\$6	-\$1
Percent of time CP(s) receiving Food Stamp (SNAP) benefits	68.6%	69.6%	-1.0%
Average monthly Food Stamp (SNAP) benefits, CP(s)	\$417	\$403	\$14

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

PEER Pilot Impacts

Impacts of the NCP Choices PEER curriculum are discussed in this section. Impacts presented here are computed for participants entering the program between June and September, 2010. Post-program outcomes are estimated through the third quarter of 2010 for many measures, and through the fourth quarter of 2010 for child support collections and unemployment claims.

Jailing Rates of Non-custodial Parents

Unlike the establishment pilot, the NCP Choices PEER pilot involved random assignment *at the point of participation in workforce services*. Thus, it makes little sense to measure the program impact on workforce development participation by non-custodial parents. It is appropriate to ask, however, the extent to which NCPs were subjected to greater rates of incarceration for either a failure to cooperate with Choices requirements, or for non-payment of child support.

The final measure shown in Table 11 revealed very low rates of NCPs being ordered to jail for non-payment of child support or non-participation in Choices. These rates were equally low for NCP Choices PEER clients and members of the control group, as there were no significant differences between the groups on this measure.

Table 11: NCP Choices PEER Impact on NCPs' Jailing Rates

	NCP Choices PEER Adjusted Mean	Control Group Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices PEER Impact
Percent of months in which NCP ordered to jail for non-payment of child support	3.6%	2.5%	1.1%

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

Payment of Child Support

The next set of analyses addresses the question whether the NCP Choices PEER curriculum leads to increased child support payments. One measure gauges the frequency of

the NCP making any child support payment and another examines the average dollar amount of payments. These measures are computed on a monthly basis. Again, these should be regarded as short-term impacts. Measures in the following section quantify the *consistency* with which child support payments were made over time.

As shown in Table 12, participation in NCP Choices PEER caused no differences in the frequency of any child support collections subsequent to being ordered into the program. The absolute frequency of collections, being in the 40-50 percent range, tended to be higher than the rates discussed above in reference to the EP program, but the NCP Choices PEER impact was not statistically significant. There were also no differences in the average monthly dollar amount of child support collections.

Table 12: NCP Choices PEER Impact on Child Support Collections

	NCP Choices PEER Adjusted Mean	Control Group Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices PEER Impact
Percent of time any child support collections made	50.4%	43.6%	6.8%
Monthly average child support collections	\$241	\$213	\$28

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

Consistent Payment of Child Support

Results of the comparison of child support payment consistency, shown in Table 13, indicate that the NCP Choices PEER impact on consistency of child support payment was positive but only statistically significant for the second measure, making payments in three out of three months. NCP Choices PEER participants were 10 percentage points more likely to pay in three out of every three months, relative to their control group counterparts. This impact represents a significant 47 percent increase in the frequency of consistent payment of child support.

Table 13: NCP Choices PEER Impact on Consistency of Child Support Collections

	NCP Choices PEER Adjusted	Control Group Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices PEER
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	Mean		Impact
Consistent payment of child support, at least 2 out of 3 months	46.7%	42.0%	4.7%
Consistent payment of child support, 3 out of 3 months	31.1%	21.2%	9.9% **

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

Employment and Earnings of Non-custodial Parents

The next analysis examines whether NCP Choices PEER leads to increased employment rates and earnings levels of non-custodial parents. Three indicators include one that gauges the percent of time NCPs were employed subsequent to program entry, another that measures the quarterly earnings levels of those who were employed, and an unconditional earnings measure that is calculated including both the employed and unemployed. As shown in Table 14, the NCP Choices PEER curriculum to this point has had no significant impacts on measures of NCP employment rates or earnings levels. Although the differences in earnings might seem to be rather large, and not in the expected direction, the lack of statistical significance of this difference dictates that the impacts be treated as zero. In fact, the numbers of observations behind this analysis represent only the small fraction of participants who entered PEER in its first month of operations, so these early results are likely misleading. As noted before, due to lags in data reporting, it is too early to tell whether PEER will impact earnings or employment.

Table 14: NCP Choices PEER Impact on Employment and Earnings

	NCP Choices PEER Adjusted Mean	Control Group Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices PEER Impact
Percent of time NCP employed	23.0%	43.4%	-20.4%
Average quarterly earnings, among employed NCPs	\$1035	\$3141	-\$2106
Unconditional earnings, including those employed and unemployed	\$213	\$1321	-\$1108

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

Additional Employment Measures

Since PEER is being evaluated as a package of add-on services to the typical NCP Choices services, and both treatment and control group members are in Choices, one advantage of this is the availability of additional measures through the tracking system that is a part of the Choices program. Workforce services caseworkers track participants' employment, including how long it takes them to get a job, hourly wages, and whether they participate in the program¹⁰. As shown in Table 15, the PEER curriculum has thus far had no significant impact on any of these measures. It is interesting to note, however, the substantially higher employment rates reported here, as compared to the low employment rates based on UI-reported earnings above. The potential difference between the two employment measures is that the caseworker-reported measure can also include self-employment as well as more formal employment that happens not to be covered by the UI program.

Table 15: NCP Choices PEER Impact on Additional Employment Measures

	NCP Choices PEER Adjusted Mean	Control Group Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices PEER Impact
Employed	70.9%	71.4%	-.5%
Weeks to gain employment	2.96	4.51	-1.55
Hourly wage	\$9.13	\$8.97	\$0.16
Failed to Participate	7.7%	9.7%	-2.0%

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

Unemployment Insurance Claims by Non-custodial Parents

Next, several analyses address questions including whether NCP Choices PEER causes reduced rates of filing unemployment claims or receiving unemployment benefits, and

¹⁰ Note that although the time dimension of these measures is difficult to quantify, they are all reported within the typical 6-month Choices participation window.

whether the program causes more stable earnings trends, leading to greater eligibility for the unemployment insurance (UI) program if NCPs were to lose their jobs. The first questions were answered by gauging the percent of months in which NCPs filed unemployment claims subsequent to program entry, the percent of months in which NCPs received unemployment benefits, and the dollar amount of unemployment benefits received.

As shown in the first three rows of Table 16, to date there have been no significant impacts of the NCP Choices PEER curriculum on filing of unemployment claims or receipt of unemployment benefits. Again, since this type of measure is likely to show effects of an employment program only after several quarters have elapsed, it is not surprising that no effects have yet accrued.

Table 16: NCP Choices PEER Impact on Unemployment Insurance Measures

	NCP Choices PEER Adjusted Mean	Control Group Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices PEER Impact
Percent of months in which NCPs filed unemployment claims	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Percent of months in which NCP received unemployment benefits	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Average monthly unemployment benefits received by NCP	\$0	\$0	\$0
Percent of time monetarily eligible for UI based on earnings	9.3%	15.2%	-5.9%

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

As before, the question regarding monetary eligibility for unemployment was answered based on NCP earnings histories subsequent to the program, by calculating the percent of time in which NCP earnings were sufficient to qualify monetarily for the UI program (if he or she were to lose his/her job). Thus far, as shown in the last row of Table 16, NCP Choices PEER has had no significant impact on monetarily eligibility for unemployment benefits. Again, this measure suffers from the same reduced follow-up interval discussed above in regards to UI employment and earnings, and it is therefore unlikely that significant impacts on this measure would be seen this soon.

Receipt of TANF and other Public Assistance by Custodial Parents

The final analysis attempts to determine whether PEER for non-custodial parents has led to decreased TANF and/ or SNAP (Food Stamp) participation for the associated custodial parents (CPs) and their children. Two measures count the percent of post-program months in which the custodial parent(s) received any TANF or SNAP benefits, and two more measures look at the average dollar amounts of program benefits received on a monthly basis. Findings shown in Table 17 indicate that thus far, the PEER curriculum has had no significant impact on receipt of TANF or SNAP benefits by the custodial parents associated with NCPs ordered into PEER.

Table 17: NCP Choices PEER Impact on Receipt of TANF and SNAP by Custodial Parent

	NCP Choices PEER Adjusted Mean	Control Group Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices PEER Impact
Percent of time CP(s) receiving TANF benefits	6.8%	7.3%	-.5%
Average monthly TANF benefits, CP(s)	\$13	\$14	-\$1
Percent of time CP(s) receiving Food Stamp (SNAP) benefits	72.3%	79.5%	-7.2%
Average monthly Food Stamp (SNAP) benefits, CP(s)	\$608	\$605	\$3

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

DISCUSSION

The most salient point about the impact results reported here is that the NCP Choices establishment pilot (EP) and PEER pilots have only been operating a short time. Thus, it is generally true that the follow-up interval that has accrued to this point is too short to estimate impacts with a high degree of reliability. What this means, in statistical terms, is that the impact studies, thus far, have less statistical power than is necessary to reliably determine the impacts of these programs. Under conditions of low statistical power, one can only detect strong effects; weaker effects need greater statistical power to be detectable. Thus, we can speculate that those few impacts reported here that are statistically significant may be early indicators of relatively strong effects. On the other hand, there may be weaker effects of the programs on other measures that will only emerge with additional follow-up, including both additional participants and additional follow-up time.

In terms of findings, the establishment pilot (EP), which has had a relatively longer follow-up interval, has shown significant positive impacts on all measures of child support collections, including frequency and amount of payments, as well as consistency. In fact, the eighteen percentage point gain in any collections represents a near-doubling of the frequency of collections. This set of child support impacts clearly suggests that the establishment pilot, like the enforcement version of NCP Choices it was derived from, is likely to have its strongest effects on child support collections. For most other measures, the follow-up interval is simply too short to know for sure whether impacts will ultimately be found.

The NCP Choices PEER pilot, with a slightly shorter follow-up interval due to a more recent implementation, has thus far shown impacts only on the consistency of child support payment. Although this one positive impact shows promise, there are several reasons one would not expect strong findings from this program at this early date. The first, already noted above, is the low statistical power due to small sample size and short follow-up that makes it likely that only the strongest effects would be detectable this early. Second, and perhaps not as obvious, is that this impact analysis is actually testing for program effects over and above the impact of an already proven successful program. All participants in the PEER study, including both treatment group and control group members, receive the enforcement version of NCP Choices services, a program that has been shown to lead to increased child support and employment rates and reduced TANF, among other findings (Schroeder &

Doughty, 2009). Indeed, the high monthly average child support reported for both groups in the PEER study, at over \$200 per month, suggests that the Choices services in PEER are effective for both the treatment and control groups. Attempts to get another program, any program, to improve upon these positive findings is a fairly tall order. In this context, the fact that child support payment consistency has increased in response to the PEER intervention is an impressive finding.

Caveats and Limitations of Analysis

One difficulty in interpreting the impacts of the establishment pilot at present is that, because of data problems, it is difficult to determine the rate at which NCPs are participating in workforce services. We had earlier warned, in the implementation study, that one possible risk with extending Choices services to NCPs earlier in their case histories is that, without the possibility of throwing NCPs in jail for non-payment of child support, there may not be enough leverage to encourage the high rate of compliance seen in the original enforcement NCP Choices program. Thus it is important to know the level of compliance in the EP program. However, if there were in fact no participation in Choices services among those ordered into EP, it would be difficult to achieve the sort of child support impacts that have been observed thus far. Thus, we can conclude that some compliance with the order to participate in Choices must be occurring. Without knowing how great the level of compliance is, it is difficult to compare the impacts of the establishment pilot to those typically achieved by the enforcement version of the program.

Another issue with the establishment pilot impacts concerns their generalizability, or the applicability of these findings to other populations and settings. As described earlier, because of the use of a caliper to refine and improve the matched comparison group, some members of the group that received Choices services had to be omitted from the impact analysis. Interestingly, the 13 NCPs omitted (or 12 percent of the treatment group), apparently included virtually all of those with higher arrears balances, since the average arrears of the groups after the caliper was applied dropped to around \$1300 to \$1700. Thus, we can firmly state that EP has an impact for those with low arrears balances, but we do not have evidence of what impact the program might have on those with higher arrears balances. Of course, the EP program was not really designed to serve those with high arrears balances,

but rather to serve low-income NCPs before they had a chance to accumulate arrears. And since the enforcement version of NCP Choices is known to work well for those with high arrears, the point may be moot.

Next Steps

The next steps for this project include continuing to follow participants in both the establishment pilot and PEER to allow longer-term impacts to accrue. The addition of new clients will also help to boost the statistical power of this impact study, but even if enrollment were to be discontinued, having an extended follow-up interval for existing clients would increase the chances of detecting program impacts if they exist.

Among steps that must be completed later this year are the need to fix errors with the workforce data that have precluded an accurate measure of workforce participation among those ordered into the program. Furthermore, the research team is currently engaged in an implementation study of PEER that must be continued in order to know if the program is operating as designed, and to be able to interpret any findings that may emerge from the continuing impact study. Both of these products, the implementation analysis and more detailed program impacts for EP and PEER, will be reported upon in late summer, 2011.

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